

Tile Hack

by Mike Berkey (michael.berkey@gmail.com), Copyright 2009. For more Microlite20 awesomeness, head over to the Microlite20 website at <http://www.microlite20.net>.

This game is the result of a week-long binge session of “Bookworm Adventures”, a life-long fascination with Scrabble and an unholy marriage with Greywulf’s ultra-thin Microlite20 version of D&D.

Your characters are dungeoneers in the finest tradition of pen and paper fantasy: elven wizards, doughty dwarven fighters, fighting men of legend, priests of arcane gods, all out to save the Realms from nefarious villains and drooling, evil monsters.

The big difference from standard D&D? No dice. (Mostly. We’ll get to the exceptions later). Actions are resolved by spelling words with Scrabble tiles. Spell out bigger words or words using rare tiles to do better. As with Scrabble, the point values of the tiles you use to spell your words will determine your success. Unlike Scrabble, the results show how strongly you swung your sword, how mighty your spell is or even how quickly you dodged the blade of a sprung trap.

The mightier your vocabulary, the more your characters’ fame and power will grow.

What you need:

- Tiles from a Scrabble board—one box per 3 players would probably be appropriate.
- Some dice for the GM
- Paper
- Pencils
- Friends

Character Creation

Characters have three attributes: **Strength**, **Dexterity** and **Mind**. Roll 4d6 for each statistic in any order, dropping the low die and totaling the remainder.

Each score’s bonus is equal to **(Score-10)/2**, **rounding down**).

Races

Humans get +1 to all skill rolls. They have the ability to redraw 3 tiles per adventure from their Action Pool, Dodge Pool or the Party Pool.

Elves get +2 to MND. They always get an appropriate word bonus for nature words.

Dwarves get +2 to STR. They always get an appropriate word bonus for spelling out words about metals, stone and other underground topics.

Halflings get +2 to DEX. Halflings that are not thieves can be Sneaky (see “Sneaking” in the magic section). Halfling Thieves get +1 to any bonuses from being Sneaky.

Classes

Characters can be Fighters, Thieves, Mages or Clerics. All characters begin at Level 1.

Fighters get a +1 bonus to combat damage, with an additional +1 at 5th level and every five levels on. They gain +3 to the Physical skill. They also get an appropriate word bonus if they spell combat-oriented words like “HEW”, “SMASH”, or “SWORD” in combat. Along with using shields, they can wear any type of armor and can use any type of weapon.

Thieves get +3 to their Subterfuge skill. They are Sneaky (see “Sneaking” in the Magic section). While being Sneaky, Thieves get a +1 bonus to damage or effect, with an additional +1 at 5th level and every five levels on. Thieves can only use leather armor, bows and one-handed weapons.

Mages can cast spells. When doing so, they get a +1 bonus to damage or effect, with an additional +1 at 5th level and every five levels on. They gain +3 to their Knowledge skill but are limited in choice of gear. Mages do not wear armor and can only use daggers and staves.

Clerics can use healing magic, call on divine aid and can turn undead. When doing so, they get a +1 bonus to damage or effect, with an additional +1 at 5th level and every five levels on. They gain +3 to their Communication skill. They can use any armor, shields and blunt weapons.

Gameplay

Tile Pools

The heart of the game involves drawing tiles from “pools” to form words. Each character has access to three: the **Action Pool**, the **Dodge Pool** and the **Party Pool**.

When a word is formed, those tiles are discarded and the empty slots are filled with fresh tiles, up to the maximum number of tiles allowed for that pool. The Dodge Pool is an exception to this: it refreshes at the end of the combat.

Action Pool. This is the character's main pool, the stockpile that is used to resolve skills, attack rolls, saving throws, cast spells, turn undead and just about anything else that happens in game. **You get 4 tiles, plus half your level (rounded down), plus your highest stat modifier.**

Dodge Pool. Your character's ability to get out of harm's way as a last ditch defense. Once you spell words from this pool, those tiles are gone until the end of combat. The point value of words formed from this pool directly negates damage or magical effects. Using your Dodge Pool is a free action. **You get 6 tiles plus your DEX modifier.**

Party Pool. The entire party gets a pool of 6 tiles that anybody can choose tiles from at any time. You can only draw up to 2 letters from the party pool for a given word. At least one letter has to be from one of your own Pools.

If you can't spell ANY words using any of your own tiles on an action (but not a dodge), you can discard your entire Action Pool and declare a FUMBLE. Something moderately bad happens to you, such as you tripping and falling down or dropping your weapon (GM's call), but you can then completely refresh your Action Pool.

If you don't FUMBLE, then you simply miss, but keep your tiles, hoping that you either see a word eventually or the Party Pool turns up something later on.

Add the face values of any tiles you use. Blank tiles may be any letter desired, but have no point value of their own. The total determines how successful you are at your action.

Summary:

Action Pool = 4 + (1/2 level, rounded down) + highest stat mod

Dodge Pool = 6 + DEX mod

Party Pool = 6

Appropriate Words

In some cases, spelling out an appropriate word can give out some bonus points (+1 up to, say, +5 or so). Appropriate words may even, in some circumstances add additional effects.

For example, a Thief who spells out “ROPE” in combat may trip up a guard, making them fall down or immobilizing them until they manage to untie themselves.

Skills

There are four skills: **Physical**, **Subterfuge**, **Knowledge** and **Communication**.

Skill rank = level + any bonus due to your class or race.

To pass a skill test, make a word from your Action Pool and total the tile values. You can draw additional tiles from the Party Pool, if necessary, with the usual restrictions.

Add your skill rank and the bonus from the most appropriate statistic. If the total point value is equal to or greater than the DC, you're successful.

DC's range from 10 (dead easy) to 35 (legendary difficulty). A simple task can be assumed to have a DC 15; most tasks would be around 20.

For example, Climbing would use Physical + STR bonus. Dodging a falling rock is Physical + DEX

bonus. Finding a trap is Subterfuge + MIND bonus. Disabling a trap is Subterfuge + DEX bonus.

Note that there are no “saving throws” in this game; use Physical + STR or DEX bonus for Fortitude and Reflex saves. Saving against magic (Will save) is usually Knowledge + MIND bonus.

Spelling out an appropriate word might give a bonus to skill tests—in most cases, an extremely appropriate or fun word should give an automatic success, no matter the actual DC.

For example, if you can spell out “SNEAK”, you might get a +3 bonus to sneak past a guard. Spelling “LADDER” might give you a bonus to climbing up a cliff. If you're trying to remember information about the great wizard-king, Amalric, then actually spelling out “AMALRIC” might give you an automatic success and very specific information.

Combat

Hit Points = Strength + 1d6 hit points/level

Characters get Strength + 1d6 hit points/level. Hit points are recovered quickly in this version of the game—4 hours of rest are sufficient to recover half lost hit points, another 4 restores all of them.

Equipment

Players can start with any non-magical equipment within reason.

Weapon Ratings:

0 = unarmed

+1 = dagger, hand axe, club, staff, sling

+2 = bow, sword, axe, mace, hammer

+3 = two-handed weapon, but you go last automatically

Armor Ratings:

+1 = shield

+1 = leather

+2 = chain

+3 = plate

Magic items. If a magic item has a rating listed (+1, +2, etc), then that number adds on to the weapon or armor rating.

Of course, just giving an item a straight bonus is a bit dull. Magic items can have other effects that play off of tile values and words. Here's some examples:

Initiative order is determined by drawing a Scrabble tile from the stack—the closer to A (alphabetically) you get, the higher your initiative is. Each positive bonus in Dexterity gives you an additional draw—choose the best one. Having a negative DEX mod means you go last in case of a tie. Initiative is only drawn at the beginning of combat, not round by round.

As long as you make a word, you hit automatically. If you can't make a word, you “miss” and have the option of declaring a fumble.

Damage done in an attack is the point value of word, plus your STR mod and the rating of your weapon.

Subtract the armor of your opponent from that damage and apply the rest to your opponent's hit points.

Damage = total point value + STR mod + weapon rating + magic and other bonuses – Armor – other defensive bonus

After hit points are used up, the opponent is defeated. Players or monsters aren't necessarily dead, just out of the fight until revived. This is a more kid-oriented game, after all.

Remember that you can further reduce damage by taking advantage of your Dodge Pool.

Bag of Holding. Whenever a character reaches into it, there's a 50% chance that any non-magical item that can reasonably fit through the Bag's opening is stored within. Any items produced disappear after an hour. Thieves, for obvious reasons, love this item.

Cap and Gown +1. Gives a Mage one more tile to his Action Pool when worn in addition to the armor bonus.

Eric the Red's Battle Axe +2. Viking Warriors do double point value with V's and W's!

Pirate's Eye Patch. All B's, R's and I's do an extra point of damage.

Potion of Healing. Drink the potion or feed it to someone else—if you can spell a word, you get double the point value of the tiles back as HP, up to the maximum.

Shiny Bauble. Spell out a type of bird and that type of bird appears and helps you out for the rest of the adventure. You can only use this once per adventure. Note to munchkins: Rocs don't always fit very well in dungeons.

Magic

Arcane magic is divided into several schools. Each School covers a broad area of magic.

Each Mage starts knowing two schools of magic at first level. Every two levels they advance past the first (e.g. 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, etc), they learn another school.

Mages can cast any spell within reason, provided they know the proper schools, but have to spell words to determine the effect. Every time you cast a spell, you have to justify it to the GM, given the types of magic that your character knows.

These spells are not drawn from the SRD and do not cost hit points to cast.

If a spell or special ability is successful, it does point value damage plus the Mind modifier of the caster with an additional bonus depending on the Mage's level (+1 at first level, and another +1 for every 5 levels total).

If the **effect of the spell can't be quantified by damage**, then that total (plus the Mind modifier, level based bonuses, etc) becomes the save DC for whatever the spells' effect is, such as sleep or entangle.

For spells that **enhance attributes**, use the point total divided by 5, rounded down. Spells that **enhance armor rating** do so as total divided 10, again rounded down.* Bonuses from magic spells do not stack—if a more powerful spell is cast, the higher bonus simply replaces the lower.

* Because Armor Rating is **staggeringly useful**.

Summoned creatures have the point total in hit points if they are under the caster's control. If not, then they have double the point total, but are controlled by the GM instead (this can backfire if it's a powerful summon). Other statistics and attacks are to be determined by the GM, as appropriate to whatever was summoned. The point total can be broken up into multiple summoned creatures.

For anything else not covered, just set a target DC that feels right and run with it. For example, if a character wants to conjure up a wall of ice to block a passageway, tell them to beat DC 20 and if successful, there's now a 2 foot thick wall of ice spanning the passageway and blocking the monsters' path. The important thing is to not tie up the game and to keep things fun.

Spell durations are up to the GM, but can be assumed to last the entire combat.

If the spell affects more than one monster at a time, then it affects everything in a 10' foot radius, but has half effect.

The GM always has a right to veto spells, set appropriate DC's or penalties to exceed or otherwise determine how they work.

If the player spells an appropriate word, give out some bonus points as per the section on Appropriate Words. For example, you could use "void" to cast lightning bolt on a bunch of spiders, but using "zap" would get a +3 damage bonus.

Fatigue

Spellcasters can cast one spell per combat per level. If they try to cast more, they take a -1 penalty for each additional one, cumulative, until they can take a few minutes outside of combat to rest up.

Schools of Magic

Abjuration. Spells of warding and protection, harming trespassers and banishing spirits from beyond.

Conjuration. Summoning objects and creatures, transporting things instantly from one place to another, creating physical objects from thin air.

Divination. Learning long lost secrets, telling the future, seeing things that are far off and more.

Enchantment. Controlling the minds and actions of others.

Evocation. The manipulation and control of raw energy. Big flashy effects like lightning bolts and such.

Illusion. Hiding things in plain sight, making things appear to exist that aren't real.

Necromancy. Spells that call up the dead, communicate with the spirits and manipulate dark energies.

Transmutation. Spells that change the properties of objects or creatures.

Clerics and Magic

Clerics can cast divine magic, spells that request aid of their deity. Two specific applications of this magic are Healing and Turning Undead.

Healing is a specific spell that works on teammates—the total effect is equal to the number of hit points regained. You can attempt to heal the entire party in one action, but the ending point value is halved.

Turning undead is an attack spell. The Cleric has the option of Blasting the undead or Fearing them. Blasting does straight damage, but if the Cleric can't kill the enemy with a single Turn, then all damage from the Turn is ignored. Fear sets a DC that the undead has to save vs or flee.

Other uses of divine magic might be praying for aid, guidance and protection.

Fatigue penalties also apply to Clerical magic.

Sneaking

Certain types of characters (namely Thieves and Halflings) are described as “Sneaky”. This is, in effect, inventory-based magic that only applies in combat.

When in combat, a Sneaky character can use any item near at hand or in inventory if they can spell a related word and describe an appropriate effect. If successful, it either adds a bonus to defense or acts like an attack spell along with the character's DEX modifier.

For example, if a thief could spell "WATER", he might grab a canteen from his belt and splash it in his opponent's eyes, blinding the enemy briefly. Or he could grab some ROPE and bind an enemy up. Or he could pull down a DRAPE and get a few points extra to avoid taking damage from some guards.

The exact amount of the bonus or the effects are up to the GM, but tend to be anywhere from an extra +1 on the low end up to +5 for extremely appropriate (or fun) words.

Thieves do NOT get fatigued from Sneaking.

The Environment

Certain dungeons can have strange effects on any tiles used.

Friendly ground might add two or three extra tiles to the Party Pool. A forbidding graveyard might reduce the Party Pool by a point, due to its extreme spookiness.

Some dungeons might increase or decrease the effects of tiles. "In the Castle of Robert the Red, R's count as 5 points!" "In the Pit Of Despair, P's, D's and R's don't count as anything!" "In the Ice Dungeons Of the Frozen North, any words dealing with cold, ice or water will freeze opponents for their next action!"

Other times, there might be environmental hazards. For example, the floor might be covered with LAVA. Lava is hot—if you make a word with an L, A, or V, you take one point of damage per offending tile.

Another example might be traps. One dungeon room might be full of skeletal remains that have knives and arrows stuck in them. Other skeletons might be crushed by rocks.

This could be a clue that accidentally spelling words dealing with weapons or rocks will set off the room's traps.

Monsters!

Monsters have a set number of hit points, an armor rating that reduces damage taken and always hit automatically in combat—just the same as characters. Player armor subtracts from this damage as usual, as does the defense pool.

Instead of spelling tiles out to do damage, the GM just rolls their attack damage with dice. This is mostly intended to save the GM time in large fights—having to

come up with a dozen words per round in a fight with a kobold tribe would get to be a pain after a while!

Each monster will have a basic attack plus one or more “interesting” attacks that they can do periodically, as the GM prefers.

For example, A Black Dragon has 4 attacks listed—a low damage Claw attack, a Bite attack, Acid Breathe and they can Beat Wings, causing everyone nearby to fall down. The GM can have the Dragon do any one of those four things per round. Or he could have the Dragon do something else, like roar loudly (for intimidation factor or just to give the PC's a rest), fly away, or grab something in its talons.

If you want more randomness than that, then roll d6: on a 1-3, the monster does a basic attack, on a 4, the monster boasts, misses with his attack or otherwise makes some kind of display. Otherwise, choose one of their specials at random.

Monster Skills. Whenever a monster has to make a skill roll or save, roll d20 plus their number of Hit Dice. If it's something they'd reasonably be good at, add another +3 to the total.

Converting monsters from the SRD. Keep Hit Dice as is. Assume maximum hit points, plus an extra 5 points as a kicker. Armor rating is either by type of armor they're wearing, or determined by their natural armor. I'd suggest converting "natural armor" to armor rating at a ratio of 1:4, rounding down. So, if an adult red dragon has a natural armor of +21, then armor is 5.

Choose one of their attacks as their normal attack, using the damage listed in the SRD entry. Next, think of a few likely things they might do and list these as additional attack options. See the examples below for samples.

These are only guidelines—if the numbers seem a bit lower or higher than they should be, adjust them to something more comfortable for you and your group.

A note on difficulty: the difficulty of combats in this game varies widely depending on player skill. Some groups will have no problem grinding out 15 point word after 15 point word, others might not.

Here's some ideas to even things out:

Game too hard?

Use one or more of these options:

- Hand out bonus tiles to the players
- Increase the size of the various pools by a few tiles.
- Monsters have -5 hit points (ie remove the kicker)
- Throwaway monsters such as kobolds have 1/2 hit points
- Reduce monster damage by -2
- Reduce monster damage by 1/2

Game too easy?

Enable one or more of these options:

- Increase monster armor by +1 or 2
- Increase monster HP
- All monsters get another HD or two
- Reduce the size of the Party Pool to 4 tiles
- Use some of the optional rules from the end of this document, such as "Word Nazi" or "No Repetition"

Another way to adjust the pacing of the game is to vary the monsters' attacks. If a monster is giving the players a hard time, have it spend an action or two boasting, roaring or otherwise putting on a display while the PC's catch their breaths.

As a final note, this game is designed to be woolly and unpredictable. Don't be surprised when a player pulls out a 40 point word and turns your fire-breathing big bad into a kitten—see it as an opportunity.

Bear, 6HD, 77 hp, 1 armor, Attacks: Teeth and Claws (1d8+8), Hug (if "Claws" hits, a bear can grapple—grapples do damage as per "Claws", but the target can't move or dodge, and loses their weapon rating bonus if it's anything more unwieldy than a dagger. You can break a bear's grapple with a STR + Phys check vs DC 27), Fearsome Roar (anybody within 10' does 1d6 points less on their next attack)

Black Dragon, Adult, 19 HD, 309 hp, 3 armor, Attacks: Claw (1d8+3 damage), Bite (2d6+7), Breathe Acid (12d4 damage to everyone in front of it), Beat Wings (1d6 damage, knocks everyone down). Some Black Dragons are quite intelligent and can cast spells—they mostly use magic dealing with swamps, darkness, acid and poisons.

Kobold, 1 HD, 13 hp, 1 armor. Attacks: Spear (1d6-1 damage), Tile Thief (Roll 1d6: on 1-3 steals one tile from their target's Action Pool, which is NOT replaced until after the target's next action).

Ogre, 4 HD, 48 hp, 2 armor, Attacks: Great Club (2d8+7 damage), Bellow (+5 to next attack's damage), Smash Floor With Enormous Club (1d6 damage to all nearby, and everybody who takes damage also can't use one of the following letters on their next attack: **Roll 1d6:** 1 O, 2 G, 3 R, 4 E, 5 S, 6 Roll Twice)

Orc, 1HD, 14 hp, 1 armor, Attacks: Battle Axe (1d8+1 damage), Bellow (+3 to next attack's damage).

Skeleton, 1 HD, 17 hp, 1 armor (battered shield), Attacks: Rusty Weapon (1d6+1), **Notes:** Blunt weapons do double damage to Skeletons. Piercing weapons do half damage.

Viper, 1HP, 6 hp, 0 armor, **Attacks:** Poisonous Bite (1d6 damage, each hit that does damage does an extra 1 point of damage per bite per round, for 3 rounds).

Zombie, 2 HD, 27 hp, 0 armor, **Attacks:** Club (1d6+2). Notes: Zombies emit such an unpleasant aroma that anybody capable of smell attacking them takes a -1 to all point totals in their presence.

Level Advancement

As the players defeat monsters and figure out traps and puzzles, they gain experience.

XP is equal to the Hit Dice of defeated monsters. Add +1 for each doubling of the number of foes: for example, 1 kobold = 1XP. 2 kobolds = 2XP. 4 kobolds = 3XP, etc.

For traps and other situations, assign an appropriate amount of XP for the difficulty of the trap. Usually it will be in the same ballpark as the average type of monster in the dungeon.

When the total equals 10x the character's current level, they've advanced to the next level. Reset the total to 0 after advancing.

Each level adds +1d6 to Hit Points and +1 to all skills.

If the level divides by three (i.e. level 3, 6, 9, etc) add 1 point to STR, DEX or MIND.

If the level divides by five (i.e. level 5, 10, 15, etc), each of the classes' special ability bonuses goes up by +1 (Fighters' damage bonus, Mages' spellcasting bonus, etc).

Optional Rules

These are some additional ideas to make play more interesting. Some of them make the game easier, some harder. Others are just for flavor.

Counting HP with a bowl of jelly beans. In this case, literally for flavor. You do damage, you get rewarded with food. Downside: the GM gets full very quickly. You may have to use peanuts or some other, less filling food. "You take 7 damage! *NOM NOM NOM NOM*"

Hewing. If your attack does a huge amount of damage (20+, for example), and it's enough to drop an opponent in one hit, then the remainder of the damage applies to the monster next to it.

Example: Mort the Verbose, an 18th level dwarven fighter with a +2 Battle Axe and 19 STR, shouts out

"FLOCCINAUCINIHIPIILIFICATION!!!"

as he attacks an Ogre with 48 hp. He does 60 points of damage (48 for the word, +4 for the axe, +4 for his STR bonus, and an additional +4 because he's an 18th level Fighter).

The mighty blow kills the Ogre. The remaining 10 damage (losing 2 points because of the Ogre's armor) is applied to the Orc cowering next to the Ogre as Mort's powerful swing tears right through.

Leveling The Playing Field. Powerful armor can render certain PC's nearly invulnerable to monster attack while the PC's rain down high damage words in retaliation. You can level the field a bit with this rule: if a monster rolls a maximum result on a die, roll another die, minus 1 point and add it on to the total. Keep doing that as long as the die keeps coming up maximum.

Example: An Ogre slams Mort with his two-handed great club. He rolls 2d8+7 for damage. The dice come up 2 and 8. Rolling another d8-1 one, he gets another 8 and rolls again. This time, a 4. The total damage is now 27 points (17 + 7 + 3). Ouch.

No Repetition! Repeat words in a given combat are not allowed. Alternatively, each repeated word in an adventure gives a -1 cumulative effect. You might want to keep a list with tally marks next to each word as it's made.

Obey The Timer. Use a timer from some other game or a stopwatch and give each of the players 10 seconds to make their move. If they don't, then declare the action a miss.

Word Combos. If your word can follow the previous players' words to form a sentence, then there's a cumulative +2 damage per additional word that hits the monster when the sentence is completed. If the sentence is derailed, then the damage is lost. Each word does damage normally as it is formed.

Example:

Word 1 THE

Word 2 PEN

Word 3 IS

Word 4 MIGHTIER

Word 5 THAN

Word 6 THE

Word 7 SWORD. Boom! The attack lands with an extra 12 damage!

Word Nazi. ALL words must be appropriate to the action. If you want to attack, then you have to spell out something like "WHAM", "SMACK", "STAB", or "SHOOT". If you want to climb a wall, then you'd have to spell out "ROPE" or "CLIMB" or something like that. Warning—this variant can be extremely challenging. You may want to increase all word pools by a few tiles to compensate.